

“My ideas are important too!”: Student perceptions of a critical pedagogical transport safety education experience in rural Australia

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Abstract

How is a transport safety education program designed to involve school students in producing their own knowledge and empowering students to think critically, perceived by school students themselves? Eleven students aged thirteen and fourteen from rural Australia participated in three transport safety education lessons using a critical pedagogical approach to learning. Through focus groups the students shared their thoughts and feelings about their experiences, and ten clear themes on their values were identified. These themes may help policy makers and program designers understand school students' motivations for learning, and may improve educational outcomes if incorporated into education program design.

Background

There is some existing research which indicates some characteristics of critical pedagogy can play an important role and lead to positive outcomes in the learning intentions and success criteria of transport safety education programs (Assailly, 2015; Dragutinovic & Twisk, 2006; Ferris, 2017; Government of Western Australia, 2009 & 2009-a; Harris, n.d.; Twisk, Vlakveld, Commandeur, Shope, & Kok, 2014). Two of the underlying principles of critical pedagogy highlighted by Kincheloe (2004) are key: that students learn most effectively through producing their own knowledge; and that when students are respected and empowered, they are better positioned to use their expertise for change.

When transport safety education programs are designed, multiple stakeholders including industry and education authorities are consulted, but students themselves are not always considered as a key stakeholder and given input into the content and pedagogy of a program. What can be learned from asking the very people these programs seek to educate? This study aimed to find out how students in rural Australia viewed and responded to what and how they learned during a transport safety education experience using a critical pedagogical approach to learning.

Method

A qualitative mixed research method was used. After observing three lessons with their usual Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) teacher, a participant research method was adopted and the researcher became the teacher, using three transport safety lessons adapted from the TrackSAFE Education Year Eight Health and Physical Education curriculum resources (TrackSAFE Foundation, n.d.). The lessons included student-led learning activities such as the 'Augusto Boal Forum Theatre' technique (Hartwell, 2012) (Figure 1). Following the lessons, students actively participated in focus groups which involved student-centred activities in the spirit of critical pedagogy. Finally, their PDHPE teacher was interviewed for her perspective on the students' perceptions of the lessons. The lessons, focus groups and interview were audio recorded, students were photographed while participating in the lessons and focus groups, and images of their original work were captured. The data was analysed manually by listening to audio recordings, analysing the photographs, and conducting a thematic analysis of students' responses in the lessons and focus groups.



Figure 1. Six students using the Augusto Boal Forum Theatre technique. They created their own thirty second play, and chose to portray a distracted driver hitting a pedestrian. Other students said “Freeze”, took the place of a character, restarted the play, and made safer choices to change the ending of the play to a positive outcome where no one was injured.

Results

Having participated in the three lessons, several students were surprised to discover that transport safety education is relevant to them despite their original beliefs to the contrary. Ten themes highlighting the students’ values emerged: ‘fun’; ‘using our own ideas’; ‘being ME’; ‘solving problems on my own or with my class’; ‘actively participating’; ‘experiencing’; ‘being heard’; ‘being respected’; ‘opening our minds to new information’; and ‘understanding the task and why it is important’.

Conclusions

The eleven students in this study had clear ideas about how they like to learn and how they want to be treated when learning. The ten themes identified indicate these students’ preferences for learning align with a critical pedagogical approach. Listening to school students’ perspectives and opinions, and gaining their input when making decisions on what and how they learn about transport safety, may lead the way to improved educational outcomes for students.

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